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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses changing attitudes in rhetorical theory, contrasting classical rhetoric's emphasis on an orator's social powers and responsibilities with current emphasis in composition textbooks on individual creativity and self-expression. The paper suggests that the implications of both attitudes should be considered when teaching composition. (RL)

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ON RHETORICAL AUTONOMY

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What is rhetoric for? Whose ends are served by discourse and by efforts to improve discourse? Answers to this question can emphasize either the private ends of the person who makes discourse or the ends of the society to which he addresses himself. In this paper I will try to show that classical rhetoric contrasts sharply with the theory of rhetoric implicit in many modern composition texts, in that the former places an extreme emphasis on the social function of rhetoric while the latter emphasizes its role in the life of the private person. I will try further to suggest the desirability of an approach to composition that would recognize the interrelationship of the personal and social uses of rhetoric.

But before getting into theory, I would like to consider an event in which the practice of rhetoric played a most interesting, and in the end a most tragic role. On September 9, 1971, inmates at the Attica Correctional Facility rebelled against prison authorities, took hostages, and established an enclave in one of the prison exercise yards. For four days they lived in D-yard, surrounded by walls and guns, yet outside the order of the prison system. During that brief illusion of freedom, natural leaders emerged and a kind of rough social order was established. Among a group of observers called to the prison by the rebelling inmates was Tom Wicker of the New York Times. An account of the short-lived society in D-yard is offered in Wicker's A Time to Die.

The social order that sprang up in D-yard at Attica is most interesting from a rhetorical perspective, because it was a social order based largely on the power of oratory. The inmate-leaders all commanded an untutored eloquence, and according to Wicker, most of the time the observers spent in D-yard was given over to speech making. Rhetoric in the most traditional and narrow sense of the term

seems to have been the glue that held the tenuous society of convicts together. Even the negotiations for a restoration of what the State of New York would regard as order consisted for the most part of making impassioned speeches, with the result that, as Wicker tells us, "Every turn toward decision flashed away in ...blazes of oratory."

I see the orators of D-yard as modern counterparts of the classical orator described by Quintilian, and embodied by such figures as Demosthenes and Cicero. As in the world of the classical orator, men rose to positions of leadership in D-yard on the strength of eloquence. Like a Demosthenes or a Cicero, they presumed to speak not merely to an audience, but for that audience, articulating the meaning of their common experience. They understood themselves to be fully identified with their audience, so that Brother Herb Blyden, perhaps the most powerful of the D-yard orators, replied when Wicker asked his name, "I am Attica."

I wince a bit at that reply, and I suspect that Tom Wicker does too, since he feels constrained to add that Brother Herb "moved into the crowd with dignity." We have little room in the larger society today for the person who would be an orator in this sense--who would make of himself the voice of a people--and so Brother Herb's claim to be Attica seems pretentious and maybe even a bit ridiculous. When we hear eloquence of the sort Brother Herb commands, it comes either as a cry from some neglected corner of our society--such as Attica--or as a sort of grace note, the praiseworthy but inessential accomplishment of a person whose real importance is rooted in other, more substantial gifts. I think of John Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson, men who spoke well, but whose political power did not rest on their eloquence. By contrast, William Jennings Bryan was probably the last major figure who tried seriously to be an orator in the grand sense, to build a public life with eloquence at the center; his

career, subsequent to the election campaign of 1896, was one of gathering irrelevance, culminating in the sad spectacle of the Scopes trial. The image of a person standing on a podium articulating a vision and moving his audience to live that vision is no longer a vital part of our culture.

But this image of the orator, of this great importance to society and of the overwhelming cultural significance of his eloquence, was the real foundation of classical rhetoric. Demosthenes, in his Address on the Crown, defined the duties of the orator in this sweeping fashion:

To discern events in their beginnings, to foresee what is coming, and to forwarn others. ...to reduce to the smallest possible compass, wherever he finds them, the slowness, the hesitation, the ignorance, the contentiousness, which are the errors inseparably connected with the constitution of all city-states; while, on the other hand, he must stimulate men to unity, friendship, and eagerness to perform their duty.

To him, the orator was virtually the consciousness of his culture, the maker and sustenance of his society.

More than four-hundred years later, Quintilian placed the image of the orator at the center of his educational program. Near the beginning of the Institutio Oratoria, for example, he says, "If I seem to my reader to require a great deal, let him consider that it is an orator that is to be educated." The entire educational project, a project that takes a boy from the cradle to adulthood, is justified by that image. I don't believe we have anything comparable to it in modern society. Suppose some contemporary educational theorist were to propose an educational program as comprehensive as Quintilian's, including the hopes a parent should conceive for the newborn child, the sorts of people the infant should be exposed to, and virtually every detail of curriculum and teaching methodology from the earliest grades through college. Now imagine this educational theorist trying to justify his program by some equivalent of the line from Quintilian just now quoted. What could he say without seeming ridiculous? "If I seem to my reader to require a great deal, let him

consider that it is a lawyer that is to be educated"? How about, "a doctor"? "A corporate executive"? Or perhaps this: "Let him consider that it is a politician that is to be educated"? Or maybe, "Let him consider that it is a scientist that is to be educated"? This last strikes me as the most nearly plausible rationale that might be offered, but even it would surely be inadequate.

My general point here is that classical rhetoricians claimed for the orator social responsibility and power such as we would not grant to practitioners of any art or science. They made him, in theory, an autonomous force, totally dominating his society. Consider, by contrast, the depth of modern skepticism about any form of self-regulation by a profession or other group. It is simply a part of modern consciousness to see inevitable conflicts between a person's social role and his personal interests. In the case of Brother Herb Blyden, we understand that he cannot be Attica, simply because he is first of all Herbert X. Blyden, a private person with interests that are his alone as well as interests he shares with his brothers in D-yard. But for the classical rhetoricians, the distinction between the private person and his role in society as orator was, ideally, non-existent. In On Duties, Cicero goes so far as to argue that there can be no real conflict between personal advantage and moral obligation; one's personal advantage is always served by acting virtuously, that is, in accordance with one's obligations to society, even when obligation would call a person to death.

The theory of rhetoric implicit in many contemporary composition texts presents a sharply contrasting picture. In place of the classical rhetorician's nearly total subordination of the person to his social role as orator, these texts make discourse first of all the rhetor's act of self-creation and self-expression, and only incidentally a socially useful art. The writer, equivalent

in such texts to the orator in classical handbooks, is portrayed as a private and fundamentally isolated individual. The struggle to discover his own honest views on a subject and thereby invent himself is his most serious business. The introduction to The Writing Commitment, for example, addresses the question, Why Learn to Write? After a brief discussion of the practical uses of writing, with very heavy emphasis on writing in school and very slight consideration of writing in a career, the authors have this to say:

There is another reason for learning to write--less practical, perhaps, but more meaningful. Writing is a form of discovery about who you are and what you think. Learning about yourself may not guarantee that you will attain better grades in college or a rewarding job later on, but it can help lead you to self-realization. Writing, then, can be a process of self-discovery.

A more obvious illustration of this emphasis in writing texts would be William Coles's Composing: Writing as a Self-Creating Process; I suspect that such a title would have made little sense to the rhetoricians of antiquity. Yet another example is Ross Winterowd's The Contemporary Writer, which offers the following justification of expository writing:

Most important: Writing, in whatever mode, is an art, a means of self-expression that you can enjoy for its own sake, like playing the violin or making ceramics. In the universe, there is a lonely, isolated being called You. The only way to overcome your loneliness and isolation is to express yourself to others. All kinds of writing, including exposition, are means of self-expression.

These few examples are meant to illustrate what I see as a significant trend in contemporary rhetorical theory as it is applied in the teaching of composition. There are, I think, good reasons for the development of this emphasis on the private, self-expressive uses of rhetoric. But what concerns me now is that this emphasis on the personal ends of rhetoric can lead to a

depreciation of its social uses, and thereby to a distorted view of many forms of writing. Consider once again, for example, the quotation I read a moment ago from Winterowd's The Contemporary Writer. What are the implications of justifying expository writing as "an art, a means of self-expression that you can enjoy for its own sake, like playing the violin or making ceramics"? Doesn't it suggest that the expositor ought to be free to choose what to report and what to leave out, without reference to the needs of an audience or the demands of a rhetorical situation? Doesn't it suggest that externally imposed requirements of accuracy and fairness are an imposition? Doesn't it, finally, present an image of a writer as autonomous in his isolation as the classical orator was in his publicity?

We come, then, to a common note underlying the contrast between classical rhetoric and modern composition pedagogy. Both are centered on the image of an autonomous rhetor concerned exclusively with the creation of a voice. For the classical orator, it is the voice of his society, of his people; for the modern writer, it is the authentic voice of a private person. Both perspectives underestimate the conflict between the private interests of the rhetor and the demands imposed by his social role, one by identifying him totally with his social role, the other by making his social role an incidental consideration of no real importance. Both theoretical frameworks lead to a nearly total concentration on the process of making discourse. The speech and the essay become artifacts of surpassing importance. The place of writing and speaking in a two-way process of communication, of dialogue, to use a much abused term, is ignored.

Wayne Booth's Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent presents a sharp contrast to the conception of the rhetor as essentially autonomous, and in so doing

provides the beginning of a humanistic rationale for a more fully adequate perspective on composition. I think the most important aspect of Booth's perspective is his understanding of what it is to be a person and of the role of discourse in being a person. For him, the self is not that "lonely isolated being" so familiar from modern literature as well as modern composition texts, but a being made in the process of communication. The self, as he puts it, is "a field of selves":

It is essentially rhetorical, symbol exchanging, a social product in process of changing through interaction, sharing values with other selves. Even when thinking privately, 'I' can never escape the other selves which I have taken in to make 'myself,' and my thought will always be a dialogue.

For Booth, then, the rhetor is no longer autonomous. He is rather in constant tension, simultaneously making and being made by his society and culture, dramatizing in the company of others the inevitable conflicts between person and social role.

I note with some relief that the title of this session is "From Historical Reference Toward Philosophy of Rhetoric," which I take to mean that I am not obliged to detail the implications of what I have said for how we actually teach composition. I am sure that taking Booth seriously would have important consequences for the teaching of composition, but at the moment my understanding of those consequences is pretty dim and confused. How, for instance, does one make writing assignments that place the student in Booth's "field of selves" rather than requiring him to play the autonomous rhetor? And how does one evaluate a student's work as something other than the artifact of an autonomous self?